

IRISH DEISM AND JEFFERSON'S REPUBLIC: DENIS DRISCOL IN IRELAND AND AMERICA, 1793-1810

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OF THE sixty or so Irishmen who played a significant executive role in the United Irish agitation in the 1790s and who subsequently emigrated to the United States, Denis Driscoll is one of the least known. Yet Driscoll's career, both in Ireland and in America, has significance and interest, for it reflects the influence of Enlightenment thought and Painite "artisan" radicalism in late eighteenth-century Ireland which fails to find focus in the careers of such more well known Irish exiles as Thomas Addis Emmet, William James McNeven, and William Sampson. Moreover, unlike many of his fellow Irish exiles, Driscoll continued to promote his political and religious ideas in the United States by playing the part of a Jeffersonian propagandist in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Augusta, Georgia. An examination of Driscoll's career, therefore, offers an opportunity to explore the transformation of Irish Jacobinism in the New World environment of Jeffersonian America.

Denis Driscoll was born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1762 to a Roman Catholic family of means sufficient to give him an education on the Continent. He trained for the priesthood, possibly in Spain as he later advertised his services in Philadelphia as a Spanish teacher.¹ How long he served as a Catholic priest following his return to Cork is not known. Nor is it known why, at the age of twenty-seven, his faith in Roman Catholicism apparently collapsed. His later contempt for Catholic "superstition" may have originated at this time, stimulated either by

1 [Georgia] *Augusta Chronicle*, (hereafter *Aug. Chron.*) 15 March 1811; *Temple of Reason*, *passim*.

religious doubt or by disagreements with his superiors. For whatever reason, in July, 1789, Driscoll conformed to the Church of Ireland, effectively disinheriting himself from his roots and at the same time entering the new world of opportunity that membership of the established church offered. At this stage of his life, he obviously felt that attachment to the norms and values of the Protestant Ascendancy would best promote his career.² An inevitable consequence, however, was his ostracism in west Cork, where Driscoll became the object of "a bigotted persecution which his recanting had raised."³

Armed with a recommendation from Archdeacon Tisdale, Driscoll retired to Cork City, where he was licensed as curate to the French Reformed Church.⁴ Demonstrating the holistic view that the cure of souls ought to be reinforced by the simultaneous cure of the mind, Driscoll also established a newspaper, *The Cork Gazette*, in which for a period he preached loyalism and obedience.⁵ Again, however, events turned sour and, in August, 1791, he lost his curacy, and with it went his commitment to loyalist principles. According to his erstwhile friend, the Reverend Frederick Archer, curate of St. Ann's, Shandon, by the end of 1792 the newspaper's and Driscoll's political position had dramatically changed.

The French Revolution and its successes [were] panegyrised in its columns. I cautioned the editor against indulging such innovations and admonished him and remonstrated in vain, he persisting [in] promulgating these infernal theories.⁶

Driscoll's advocacy of French revolutionary principles demonstrated the zealotry of a recent convert and the venom of personal disappointment. In many ways his radicalism was in advance of opinion held by United Irish leaders in 1792, if their later protestations that they did not reject constitutional political agitation until 1795 may be trusted. Driscoll's radicalism conformed more closely to the conventional Jacobin creed that formed the basis of the politics of such popular, artisan-supported

2 *Dublin Evening Post*, 6 August 1789.

3 F. Archer to Judge Robert Day, 23 December 1802, Irish State Paper Office, Rebellion Papers (hereafter ISPO Reb. Pap.), 620/61/80.

4 W. M. Brady, *Clerical Records of Cork, Cloyne and Ross*, 232.

5 Archer to Day, 23 December 1802; Brian Inglis, *Freedom of the Press in Ireland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 88.

6 Archer to Day, 23 December 1802; John T. Collins, "A Memorable Cork Trial of 1794," *Cork Evening Echo*, 10 December 1962.

societies in England as the London Corresponding Society and the equivalent provincial societies, than to his own compatriots' objectives in their prerevolutionary phase. Driscoll based his political demands on the Westminster Association's program of 1780 and included universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, abolition of property qualifications for parliamentary candidates, payment for M.P.s and equal electoral districts. Not until 1794 did the United Irishmen put forward this reform program officially, many months after Driscoll had first promoted it in his *Cork Gazette*.⁷

Like many of the United Irishmen, however, Driscoll derived inspiration from a radical interpretation of John Locke's writings, which he advised every "calm observer" to read diligently, and from Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man*, Parts One and Two, was extremely popular in Ireland. According to the government informer Leonard McNally, Paine's two volumes were read in Cork "by the boys at almost every school, and . . . in most houses . . . now [1793] supply the place of the Psalter and the Prayer Book."⁸ In Driscoll's Lockean and Paineite views, the people were sovereign: "no laws can be made binding on the people, which are not made by their *real* representatives."⁹ Both in London and in Dublin, parliaments were sinks of corruption, being, he wrote sarcastically, merely "two debating societies" attended "by the most dignified, [as] well as by the most abandoned of the British Empire."¹⁰

Driscoll did not stray far from the position of the Jacobin intelligentsia in Britain and Ireland when he appealed to the middling groups in society on behalf of the poor against the rapacious rich. "The history of mankind," he wrote later in the United States,

as well as our experience, shews us, that riches do not command all the virtues and all the talents in the world — on the contrary, by far the greater and purer share of virtue, honour and integrity is to be found in the middling spheres of life, and it is from this class of free and independent citizens,

7 Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 26; [Baltimore] *American Patriot* (hereafter *Am. Pat.*), 4 December 1802; R. B. McDowell, "United Irish Plans of Parliamentary Reform, 1793," *Irish Historical Studies*, III (1942), 39–59.

8 *Cork Gazette* (hereafter *Cork Gaz.*), 15 January, 12 April, 24 May 1794; James S. Donnelly Jr., "Propagating the Cause of the United Irishmen," *Studies*, LXIX (1980), 8.

9 *Cork Gaz.*, 15 January 1794.

10 *Cork Gaz.*, 11 January 1794.

that we wish to see our representatives chosen. It is men of this description in general, who feel a pride in preserving liberty and equality — they are not intoxicated with prosperity and feel no ambition from the wheel of fortune, to become a *privileged class*, superior to the *herd of mankind*.¹¹

In an Irish context, the accession to political rights of this social group would lead to greater equality and to the demise of deference, as French experience had shown. "The people have got to their natural level in France," he wrote, "where no man can be *taller* than another, nor have more power; this is what Locke called Equality, and Tom Paine the *Rights of Man*."¹² At the very least, a progressive taxation system would emerge from a revolution in the rights of suffrage. "To tax the poor people," claimed Driscoll,

and let the rich escape, is the highest injustice. . . . Of all taxes, the most equitable is that of a *Land Tax*, because then, those who lay on the burthens feel the weight of them.¹³

Commitment to the middling people, however, did not lead to condoning craft consciousness at the expense of the public good. In 1794, Driscoll strongly supported the Painite principle that all combinations for economic purposes — either of workers or employers — were morally indefensible. When the journeymen shoemakers of Cork struck for more money, Driscoll demanded while he was languishing in the local jail, "a spirited exercise of the laws. . . ."

Though we reprobate combinations among Masters as much as among journeymen, yet we would consider an employer as acting contrary to the public weal, should he encourage such men, in opposition to the laws, and in defiance of public decisions and union.¹⁴

By taking a stance against combinations, yet at the same time supporting the political rights of artisans, Driscoll reflected the current uncertainty within artisan radicalism, caused by a commitment to a harmonious, class-free society coming into conflict with newer ideas of class solidarity. Radicals were ultimately to resolve this tension in one of two ways: either by continuing to equate the common good with communitarianism, social harmony, and the General Will; or by tending towards an atomistic, laissez-

¹¹ *Am. Pat.*, 11 January 1803.

¹² *Cork Gaz.*, 12 April 1794.

¹³ *Cork Gaz.*, 11 January 1794.

¹⁴ *Cork Gaz.*, 13 August 1794.

faire individualism. In the 1790s, both tendencies could garner support from Paine's writings.

Driscoll also echoed the British Jacobins' deep suspicion of lawyers and hatred of the common law. The latter became an especial target following the trial of the Edinburgh "martyrs" of the British Convention in 1793.¹⁵ Government, Driscoll thought, deliberately resorted to the arcane common law rather than to the more intelligible and accessible statute law in order to preserve the law's — and the state's — esoteric mysteries. The common law

is only traditional and subject to such different interpretations, as may best serve the turn of parties. Statute law seems calculated for the mutual benefit of the subject, and Sovereign. Common law is solely calculated for the benefit of the Sovereign.¹⁶

A restatement of conventional Painite Jacobinism, Driscoll's political thinking proved unusual in Ireland only because it expressed a minority sensibility considerably in advance of the political position of the middle-class leaders of the United Irishmen in the early 1790s. In two respects, however, Driscoll propounded such extreme radicalism that he became a serious menace to the authorities. By his openly avowing anticlerical Deism and by promoting agrarian law, Driscoll moved beyond the limits of artisan radicalism in search of the support of the oppressed Catholic Irish peasantry of County Cork. By 1794, Driscoll's appeal had become revolutionary. His anticlericalism, his attack on tithes, and his land redistribution demands, when combined with his Painite Jacobinism, encouraged that union between urban radicalism and peasant Whiteboy-Defenderism which the authorities feared most and from which, until their commitment to revolutionary conspiracy, even most United Irish leaders recoiled.¹⁷

Driscoll's Deism had been nurtured within the fellowship of a small group of Cork radicals, whose political role and heterodox religious beliefs in the early 1790s have been curiously underestimated by historians. Amongst

15 The Edinburgh martyrs, including Thomas Muir, Thomas Fyssh Palmer, and Maurice Margorot, were transported to Botany Bay.

16 *Cork Gaz.*, 25 January 1794. Abolition of common law precedents in the United States legal system was a major objective of many British and Irish radical exiles after 1800.

17 For Cork Whiteboyism, see Maurice Bric, "Priests, Parsons and Politics: The Rightboy Protest in County Cork, 1785-1788," in *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland*, ed. C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 163-90.

Driscol's companions were the Sheares brothers, Henry and John, and John Daly Burk — all men of Cork and Deists. The Sheares brothers are perhaps best known for their presence at the execution of Louis XIV — they supposedly brought back to Ireland a handkerchief dipped in the king's blood — and for their transitory and ill-fated role in the Society of United Irishmen following the arrest of the Leinster Directory in March, 1798. In the early 1790s, however, they were involved in a clandestine radical society in Cork that had links with those dabbling in treason in Dublin. For a few months in 1794 after the authorities' suppression of the United Irish society in Dublin, only the Sheares's Cork group continued to uphold radical and revolutionary principles in southern Ireland.¹⁸ Understandably, Driscol's links with the Sheares remain obscure. Most of John Sheare's papers were devoured by mice while hidden in the ceiling of a friend's house. The Sheares brothers acted as defense counsel on both occasions when, as editor of *The Cork Gazette*, Driscol was tried for seditious libel in 1793 and 1794. Sir Jonah Barrington believed the brothers acted as editors in place of Driscol during his imprisonment. This is unlikely, but they were instrumental in the continuation of the paper from 1794.¹⁹

John Daly Burk (1772–1808) acted as the link between the Sheares, Driscol, and the clandestine revolutionary faction in Dublin during 1793–94. Driscol knew Burk intimately; in 1809 he claimed to understand “more, probably, about the character [of Burk] than any other man in the United States.”²⁰ Most probably they first became acquainted in 1790 when Burk was appointed usher at a private school in Cork run by the Reverend Armstrong.²¹ In 1792, Burk entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a sizar; he later boasted to Thomas Jefferson that there he had won

18 John [Daly] Burk, *History of the Late War in Ireland, with an Account of the United Irish Association* . . . (Philadelphia, 1799), 44.

19 Seán Ó Coindealbhain, “The United Irishmen in Cork County,” *Cork Historical and Archeological Journal*, 2nd Ser., LV (1950), 128; Richard R. Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times* 2nd. ed. (Dublin and London, 1858–60), IV, 23r. Some hints as to the shadowy role of the radicals can be found in Nancy J. Curtin, “The Transformation of the Society of United Irishmen Into a Mass-based Revolutionary Organisation, 1794–96,” *Irish Historical Studies*, XXIV (1985), 463–92; James Smyth, “Dublin's Political Underground in the 1790s,” in *Parliament, Politics and People: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Irish History*, ed. Gerard O'Brien (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1989), 129–48.

20 *Aug. Chron.*, 11 November 1809.

21 *Ibid.*

the highest "premiums" for his prose and verse compositions.²² The appeal of rational religion and the siren call of libertarianism ruined a promising future for Burk, as it did for Driscoll. Rejecting the reading prescribed by his Trinity tutors, he devoured the works of Price, Priestley, Hume, Locke, and Fontenelle, and emerged from his studies a convinced Deist and political radical. Accused of infidelism, Burk was expelled from Trinity at about the same time as the Dublin Society of United Irishmen was proscribed.²³

His future plans in tatters, Burk immediately threw himself into revolutionary plotting. He helped to repair the damage resulting from the proscription of the United Irishmen by establishing — with the high-strung Dr. James Reynolds, another friend of Driscoll's — a number of clandestine societies in Dublin. One was called "The Strugglers," named after the tavern in which it met; others were: "The Athenian," "The Telegraph," and "The Philanthropic" — the last a forum for Deist speculations. These societies acted as a front for a secret armed group which was organized into cells of ten. Among those involved were the Sheares brothers; Bagenal Harvey, later executed for his role in the Wexford uprising in 1798; and Oliver Bond, treasurer of the United Irishmen, who was arrested as a member of the Leinster Directory in 1798 and later died in prison.²⁴

Although aware of these developments in Dublin — he knew, for example, that Burk was learning the pike exercise — Driscoll was unable to take an active part, for he had been imprisoned in Cork only a few months after these intrigues had begun.²⁵ Already in 1793 Driscoll had been acquitted of a charge of seditious libel; in January, 1794, he committed the cardinal sin of promoting economic levelling.²⁶ In a long list of "Truths" encapsulating his political testament, Driscoll concluded by writing:

The earth is the common inheritance of all men. Every man has a right to a proportionate share of the country he lives in. He, who possesses a

22 Joseph I. Shulim, "John Daly Burk, Irish Revolutionist and American Patriot," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, N. S., LIV (1964), 6.

23 John Burk, *The Trial of John Burk, of Trinity College, for Heresy and Blasphemy* . . . (Dublin, 1794). Burk reprinted this pamphlet in daily installments in his Boston, Mass., *Polar Star*, 15–26 October 1796.

24 Burk, *Late War in Ireland*, 44–45, Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty* (London: Panther, 1969), 306–7.

25 *Aug. Chron.*, 11 November 1809.

26 Madden, *United Irishmen*, III, 41.

greater share of the land he lives in, than another, is a monopolist and an usurper of the rights of his fellow citizens.²⁷

When rumors circulated that certain printers were to be prosecuted "for telling Truths," Driscol began to retreat from his exposed position. Arguing that he had been speaking only in a "philosophical sense," he denied having claimed "that in the present overgrown state of society one should not possess by honest purchase, gift etc. more landed property than another. . . ." Honest men, Driscol thought, should be inclined to laugh at rather than prosecute for such a statement, attributing "the thought to folly rather than to malice."²⁸

Driscol's transparent effort to avoid prosecution proved ineffectual. At the Cork assizes in April, 1794, Driscol was tried for seditious libel. Officially, his prosecutor was not the government — although the crown solicitor instructed the prosecution — but the Reverend Archer, who had been trying in vain since 1792 to extricate himself from the recognizance he had given for *The Cork Gazette* when Driscol was still preaching loyalism. Whether Archer acted independently by employing "a confidential person" to buy a copy of the *Gazette* and sending it to the bishop of Cork, then private secretary to Lord Lieutenant Westmorland, in the expectation that the recognizance would be withdrawn, or whether official pressure was put on Archer to assist, is not known.²⁹ Driscol himself thought the personal malice of Archer to be the motivating force behind the prosecution, but certainly the authorities were determined to destroy his newspaper.³⁰

A "rogue in ruffles," as Counsellor Egan called him, Driscol was defended by the Sheares brothers, by the United Irishman Thomas Addis Emmet, and by several O'Driscolls, possibly kinsmen. Unsurprisingly, he was found guilty. In his speech before being sentenced, Driscol again denied that he had proposed an agrarian law; he had merely been speculating on Locke's opinions on government. "A man known to harbour such

27 *Cork Gaz.*, 15 January 1794.

28 *Cork Gaz.*, 19, 22, 26 March 1794.

29 Archer to Day, 23 December 1802, ISPO Reb. Pap. Archer was so unpopular he had to flee Cork in fear of his life, leaving behind clerical emoluments worth £300 a year. He thought he had extricated himself from his financial obligations as guarantor, but in 1802 he was served a writ to pay the debt of £137 Driscol had left when he quit the country.

30 *Cork Evening Echo*, 10 December 1962.

notions," he asserted, "should be pitied, as a lunatick, not prosecuted as a wicked and malicious libeller."³¹ Such specious reasoning cut little ice with the judge; Driscoll was sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

A subscription for "the first victim sacrificed for the liberty" of Cork was swiftly raised, which paid Driscoll's debts and prevented the seizure of his printing press.³² Significantly, although Driscoll had aroused considerable sympathy in a city which a local judge said was "full of disaffection," the money was conditional on his agreeing to conduct the *Gazette* "on the broad basis of constitutional principles."³³ His promotion of an agrarian law proved too much for even the urban radicals to stomach. *The Cork Gazette* continued to be published while Driscoll was in jail. Assistance was given by the prominent Cork United Irishman John Swiney, who was to be arrested in 1798 and incarcerated with other state prisoners in Scotland. Allowed to emigrate to the United States in 1802, Swiney settled in New York. A woollen-draper by trade, Swiney may have acted only as a link between Driscoll and his printer. Undoubtedly, the Sheares brothers were also involved in the operation to keep the newspaper alive.³⁴

Imprisonment failed to deter Driscoll from advocating his radical program, although all suggestions of economic levelling disappeared. He continued to extol the virtues of Deism, "the boast of Reason and the pride of philosophy," and to use Locke as the basis of his politics. He pursued the common Jacobin objective of condemning the inhumane and self-defeating policy of imprisoning debtors, and labored vigorously to unite Irishmen of all persuasions. "Those of the North and those of the South are *brothers*," he wrote. He believed "that *vice* and *virtue* alone, should constitute any difference between Irishmen; and, echoing Rousseau, that it is not their *creeds*, but their *good* or *bad* actions that recommend their principles to imitation or applause."³⁵

31 *Cork Gaz.*, 26 April 1794.

32 Financial support was sought throughout the country. In 1795 Bird the informer said that the United Irish committee in Belfast had failed to send money to Driscoll — perhaps a sign that the Ulstermen disapproved of Driscoll's political ideas. Madden, *United Irishmen*, IV, 46.

33 Judge Robert Day to [Dublin Castle], 31 December 1802, ISPO Reb. Pap. 620/61/80.

34 Seán Ó Coindealbhain, "The United Irishmen in Cork County: II, Cork City," *Cork Historical and Archeological Journal*, 2nd Ser., LV (1950), 74-79.

35 *Cork Gaz.*, 4 June, 24, 31 May 1794.

Consequently, in the wake of his release from prison and the abortive French expedition to Bantry Bay in December, 1796, Driscoll was soon threatened with another prosecution. *The Cork Gazette* was now more than a local newspaper; it circulated throughout the south of Ireland. In Waterford, the loyalist Isaac Heron, irate that his coffee house received *gratis* both the *Gazette* and the *Northern Star*, the organ of the United Irishmen, demanded their suppression. Driscoll's paper was

wicked and ought to be destroyed. Lenity or even forbearance to such outraging incendiaries at such a crisis, even themselves cannot expect, otherwise than as they rest their safety on the success of their invading allies.³⁶

Driscoll was an inevitable victim of the government's policy of repression in 1797. Faced once more with the prospect of prison, he capitulated. In September, Henry Sheares informed the Cork crown prosecutor that Driscoll was prepared to cease publication of the *Gazette* in return for the prosecution being dropped and his being allowed to leave the country. The prosecutor agreed, on condition that Driscoll found securities for good behavior and would no longer involve himself in seditious publications.³⁷

How Driscoll survived the next eighteen months, and whether he played an active role in the Rising of 1798, are not known. According to two contemporary sources, a wandering hermit called Driscoll, found with two Catholic prayer books in his possession, was half-hanged three times and flogged four times in the barrack yard of New Ross, on suspicion of having administered illegal oaths.³⁸ Denis Driscoll may have been this victim, but the prevalence of his surname in the region prevents a positive identification. Certainly, by the spring of 1799, when Driscoll was in Dublin, he lived in dire poverty. Claiming that "the want of means in this country compels me to seek bread in America," he successfully obtained a passport from the authorities in Dublin Castle. He left for America "as a freeman, and voluntarily. . . ."³⁹

Driscoll arrived in New York City with an idealized perception of the new American Republic, but also, like many of his fellow radicals who

³⁶ Isaac Heron [to Dublin Castle], 2 January 1797, ISPO Reb. Pap., 620/28/16.

³⁷ Robert Day [to Dublin Castle], 22 September 1797, ISPO Reb. Pap.; Inglis, *Freedom of the Press*, 88–89; Ó Coindealbhain, "United Irishmen in Cork City," 83.

³⁸ Edward Hay, *History of the Insurrection of Wexford, 1798* (Dublin, 1803), 7–72; James Alexander, *Some Account of the First Apparent Symptoms of the Late Rebellion in the County of Kildare* (Dublin, 1800), 28–29; Pakenham, *Year of Liberty*, 167; Madden, *United Irishmen*, 1, 322.

³⁹ Driscoll [to Dublin Castle], 4 May 1799, ISPO Reb. Pap.; *Aug. Chron.*, 18 May 1805.

fled across the Atlantic at this time, with little knowledge of America's social, cultural or even political reality.⁴⁰ Another Irish "infidel" who reached America a few months after Driscoll, John Binns, had read all the travel books he could find before emigrating. "I expected," he wrote later in his memoirs,

that among the people, even in the large towns, I should occasionally meet one of our red brethren with his squaw leaning lovingly on his arm. I expected to find the white man so plain and quakerly in their dress that I had the lace ripped from my neckerchiefs, and the ruffles from my shirts.⁴¹

For Driscoll, however, of greater importance was the prospect of residing in a republic where there existed complete freedom of religious expression, guaranteed under the Federal Constitution. He was delighted that "Mahometism is as much established by law . . . as christianity."⁴²

In reality, the situation was more complex. State constitutions were less permissive than their federal counterpart. Moreover, republicanism in America had not resulted in an irreversible decline in Christian religious observance, and in 1800 a major, sometimes dirty, campaign was waged against Thomas Jefferson's "infidelism" in a vain attempt to prevent his election as president. Nor was the Deist movement in New York, or in any other city, very influential, although in the 1790s it had made some converts amongst artisans and professional groups. From 1794 through 1804, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* went through seventeen American editions, and Deism appeared to be on the verge of attracting widespread popular support. Driscoll reached New York, however, just as the Deist creed had begun to wane before the whirlwind of the second Great Awakening.⁴³

What success Deism had owed much to its open proselytism of the 1790s. In New York, a Philanthropic or Theist Society promoted Deist ideas and ridiculed Christian superstitions within a framework of ultrare-

⁴⁰ *Cork Gaz.*, 11 January 1794.

⁴¹ [John Binns], *Recollections of the Life of John Binns: Twenty-Nine Years in Europe and Fifty-Three in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1854), 73.

⁴² *Temple of Reason*, 8 November 1800.

⁴³ Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 316; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 256-57; Roderick S. French, "Elihu Palmer, Radical Deist, Radical Republican. A Reconsideration of American Free Thought," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 8 (1979), 101-02.

publicanism. Driscoll quickly became a member. The Theophilanthropists, as they called themselves — their enemies called them “the Columbian Illuminati,” linking them to the anti-Christian conspiracies which had supposedly orchestrated revolution in Europe — acknowledged the blind, former Methodist preacher Elihu Palmer as their guru. Their numbers were small, probably about one hundred, although radicals recently emigrating from Britain and Ireland augmented their membership — among them James Cheetham, John Binns, former Scottish radicals like James Mitchell, and possibly John Daly Burk, before he was forced to flee to Virginia. A Dublin United Irishman who had moved to London in the early 1790s, Binns attended meetings of a Deist-Republican society at a pub in St. Martin’s Lane until its suppression in the crisis of March and April, 1798. With his brother Benjamin, Binns was heavily implicated in James O’Coigley’s treasonous activities at that time and was imprisoned before emigrating to America. In New York, where he remained for a few months before moving on to western Pennsylvania, Binns opened his house to the Theist Society’s members.⁴⁴

James Cheetham (1772–1810) had been a Manchester hatter who in 1793 was imprisoned, and later acquitted, on a charge of treason. An active member of two radical societies in Manchester, Cheetham and his two elder brothers were dubbed “the three Jacobin infidels.” According to one unsympathetic commentator,

With the *Rights of Man* in one hand, and the *Age of Reason* in another, he is said to have run from tavern to tavern, and from brothel to brothel, collecting and summoning together all that wickedness had rendered contemptible.... [H]e traversed the streets in contempt of both church and government.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ William Hamilton Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in this Metropolis* (London, 1800), reprinted in *Literacy and Society*, ed. Victor Neuberg (London: The Woburn Press, 1971), 13; *Temple of Reason*, 2 October 1802. For O’Coigley and the role of the Binns brothers, see Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience 1795–1803* (Gloucester: Sutton, 1983), chap. 6; Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, chap. 5.

⁴⁵ Frida Knight, *The Strange Case of Thomas Walker* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1957), chap. 15; John Wood, *A Full Exposition of the Clintonian Faction and the Society of the Columbian Illuminati* (Newark, N. J., 1802), 11; Richard J. Twomey, “Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radicalism in the United States, 1790–1800,” Ph. D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1974, 29–30. A more sympathetic portrait of Cheetham can be found in John W. Francis, “Reminiscences of Printers, Authors and Booksellers in New York,” *International Magazine of Literature, Art and Science*, V (1852), 259–60.

With his native-born partner David Denniston — another member of the Theist Society and a kinsman of New York's ruling Clinton family — Cheetham edited *The American Citizen*, a daily newspaper which, while Driscoll was in New York, extolled the virtues of ultraradical Republicanism. He supported Driscoll by offering to act as security in obtaining type and by enclosing handbills in his newspaper publicizing the Irishman's proposed new journal.⁴⁶

Driscoll enthusiastically threw himself into the Theist Society's open activities. Unsubstantiated claims were made that the society masked a clandestine organization that offered "rebellion to the religious acts of the state."⁴⁷ Given his editorial experience, and his urgent need of subsistence, Driscoll was the obvious choice as editor of the new magazine the Deists decided to establish. The first number of *The Temple of Reason* appeared on November 8, 1800; thereafter it was published weekly in New York until February 8, 1801, when Driscoll transferred it to Philadelphia, where it lasted for another two years. Driscoll's editorial policy aimed at achieving two objectives: defending President Jefferson against accusations of atheism; and defeating Christianity by undermining its intellectual pretensions. Driscoll was convinced of Jefferson's commitment to Deism, although he admitted that firm evidence was lacking. The president was, however, too strong-minded to be "superstitious" and too "philosophical" to be an atheist. Rejecting accusations that he openly defended Jefferson in the hope of patronage, Driscoll claimed — with little evidence except the general decline of debate on Jefferson's beliefs — to have succeeded in defeating the president's detractors.⁴⁸

Aimed at converting "the middling and industrious class of citizens" to Deism, Driscoll's assault on Christianity "sought to shew the world, the purity of our doctrines and the soundness of our principles, exposing at the same time, the corruption of those of our adversaries."⁴⁹ In *The Temple of Reason* for the first time Driscoll was able to abuse uninhibitedly the "superstitions" of Christian doctrine, denounce the infamy of clerics, and deny the divinity of Christ. Christian morality, he asserted, had not been divinely revealed, but was "known and taught many centuries before

⁴⁶ Wood, *Full Exposition*, 42–43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁸ *Temple of Reason*, 13 May 1801, 6 January 1802.

⁴⁹ *Temple of Reason*, 22 April 1801, 8 November 1800.

the christian era. . . . " The Bible said nothing of the most cherished Christian tenets:

Of all those declared blessed by Jesus. . . . not one word is said, of believing in the Trinity, in transubstantiation, in purgatory, in singing psalms, of paying tithes, of going to mass or church, of creeds or articles of faith, of general salvation or universal damnation, of Catholics, Protestants, Methodists, Universalists, Seekers, or Shaking Quakers, or worshipping Christ or his mother—No; for Jesus was a Deist, who came not to destroy but to fulfill the law: that is to say, to believe in and worship one God, and to do by others as he would be done by himself.⁵⁰

To promote Deism was, for Driscoll, a political act. The connections between church and state had always strengthened absolutism; destroy the power of the clergy and the arbitrary state must founder. Only when men are prepared to do without priests can they "easily shake off kings, and declare [themselves] *perfectly* free." Contrary to the opinion of most men, Driscoll wrote,

we hold that Deism and Liberty should go hand in hand. . . . It would appear to be a contradiction in terms, to find men renounce *king-craft*, and still remain enchanted by Superstition and Priest-craft.⁵¹

Unfortunately for the Deists, most Americans remained mired in irrationalism; indeed, only a tiny fraction would even have heard of *The Temple of Reason* and its doctrine of rational religion. Nor, as Driscoll had hoped, did the Christian churches respond to his provocations. The Deists believed that, if they could inveigle the clergy into an open debate, Reason and rational religion would inevitably triumph. Instead, the only clergyman to respond was the Reverend John Hargrove of the Unitarian New Jerusalem Church in Baltimore, who called himself a Deist. He sought space in *The Temple of Reason* to answer Driscoll's attacks, but was refused. The magazine had not been established "for every furious fanatic and wild visionary to rant and cant away in it," wrote the editor with unconscious irony. In response, Hargrove established his own short-lived journal, *The Temple of Truth*.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Temple of Reason*, 29, 15 November 1800, 10 January 1801.

⁵¹ *Temple of Reason*, 15 November 1800, 3 June, 22 July, 22 April 1801.

⁵² *Temple of Reason*, 22 April, 1 July, 5 August 1801. John Wood, *A Full Exposition*, 47, suggests *The Temple of Truth* may have been deliberately established by Deists to involve Christians unwittingly in debate.

By this time Driscol had moved the magazine from New York to Philadelphia. Quite why he did so remains uncertain, although John Wood, the most bitter opponent of the New York Deists, claimed that quarrels over the distribution of profits led Driscol to break away from Palmer.⁵³ If so, the breach was soon mended, as the blind preacher's visit to Philadelphia in July, 1801, was heavily advertised in *The Temple of Reason*. Palmer's crusade, however, was the scene of another public relations disaster, heavy with irony. Having advertised a lecture on morality to be given in Philadelphia's Universalist Church, whose Unitarians were usually conflated with the Deists as infidels, Palmer was turned away at the door by the disapproving church elders.⁵⁴ The exercise of Reason apparently had the infuriating consequence of continually creating conflict, not consensus.

In May, 1801, Driscol delivered before the Theophilanthropic Society of Philadelphia a lecture in which he expressed most clearly his rational and communitarian philosophy. Man, he said, was naturally a social animal; to believe that "if everyone would mind [himself], the world would be regenerated," was mere sophistry. Helping others "is the genuine worship of the Supreme Being, the only manner of acknowledging him to be the father of mankind." Rational religion "shews us that by doing good to our neighbours we do good to ourselves." To understand this does not require divine revelation; man has only to use his gift of reason: "They have only to enter into themselves; to reflect on the order and harmony produced by nature, when she is directed by an intelligent mind." Unencumbered by superstition and able to reason freely, Deists are "the best of citizens." In a classic statement of Jacobin consciousness, he continued: "Separated from the lowest class of society, who only obey force, and who never reason; separated also from the clergy, who reason so ill, [Deists] are the supporters of good government," pure in morality and with brotherly affection for all. Unfortunately, the structure of contemporary society promotes evil rather than the common good: "All the evils of which

⁵³ Wood, *A Full Exposition*, 43. Wood was a former infidel who had been involved in blasphemous, anticlerical activities in Scotland before emigrating on account of fraudulent practices. See Minutes of the Trustees of the Board of Manufacturing in Scotland, XXIX, 272, 307–12, 319–21, 329–30, 345; XXX, 128–29, 139–40. Scottish Record Office, West Register House, NG 1/1/29–30; Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, XVII, 44–58, Scottish Record Office, CH2/121/20a.

⁵⁴ *Temple of Reason*, 8 July 1801.

men complain, originate in the folly of their religious and political institutions." An improvement in the organization of society is essential. Above all, "the whole moral system, as far as it respects property, ought to be revised." This will only become possible when the religion of nature is "universally taught, studied and practised. . . ."⁵⁵

Driscoll's idealistic doctrine of universal benevolence, communitarianism, and the agrarian law — he obviously no longer feared prosecution for his views on property — fell on deaf ears. *The Temple of Reason* failed to reach beyond the small circle of committed Philadelphia Deists. With little advertising revenue and subscriptions failing to increase, Driscoll came under serious financial pressure. In January, 1802, he announced that "a society of citizens" had taken over the financial management of the magazine. Driscoll stayed on as caretaker editor until April. In the meantime, editorial policy changed; less emphasis was given to Deist principles, more to everyday news.

Within months of his discourse to the Theophilanthropists, therefore, Driscoll's optimism had turned to frustration. His confidence in the inevitable success of French revolutionary principles under the consulship of Napoleon began to decline when he heard of the ban on Deists assembling in French churches; it evaporated with the French expedition to put down the St. Domingue slave rebellion.⁵⁶ Petty quarrels, particularly destructive amongst men whose objective was to convince the benighted of Reason's ability to promote universal harmony, bedevilled Driscoll's last months in Philadelphia. He disapproved of the shareholders' desire to reduce his magazine's proselytizing mission. In his final editorial he wrote dismissively:

Deists are timid beings, they shrink at the prospect of persecution; they cannot be brought to court dungeons, racks and gibbets. If they cannot get such a world as they wish, they will be contented with it, as it is. . . .⁵⁷

Perhaps Driscoll's reactivation of property relations as a political issue, rather than his Deist evangelism, led to his failure in Philadelphia.

Driscoll's loss of confidence in his fellow Deists coincided with a growing recognition that he now lived in a society that had abandoned the

⁵⁵ Denis Driscoll, "A Discourse Delivered before the Theophilanthropic Society, Philadelphia," *Temple of Reason*, 27 May, 3 June 1801.

⁵⁶ *Temple of Reason*, 30 December 1801, 13 March 1802.

⁵⁷ *Temple of Reason*, 3 April 1802.

worst social and political excesses of contemporary European states. The United States guaranteed freedom and liberty and offered opportunities to the thousands of poor immigrants who, at the turn of the eighteenth century, were flocking into the eastern seaports.⁵⁸ In America, unlike in Ireland, the foundations existed to build at least a democratic society, if not a communitarian state. Political battles, however, remained to be fought, even in the America of Thomas Jefferson. In one of his first editorials in the Baltimore *American Patriot*, which he established in September, 1802. Driscoll wrote that “the Editor of this paper is not come on a religious, but on a *political mission*, not to quarrel with other men about their creeds, but to combat the traitors, who have the assurance to preach *royalty* in Baltimore. . . .”⁵⁹ This did not represent an abandonment of Deism — whenever he was accused of atheism Driscoll proudly defended his principles — but a recognition that the route to an improved society lay through political rather than theological debate.⁶⁰

In 1800, Jeffersonian Republicanism had triumphed both at the federal level and in Baltimore, but the threat of declension remained, thought Driscoll, while the “royalists” — his partisan description of the Federalists — remained a political force. In the eight months that he edited *The American Patriot*, he violently attacked the Federalists as British spies and traitors to the republic. Driscoll’s fears were engendered partly by the presence amongst the Baltimore Federalist leadership of a number of Presbyterian merchants from Ulster who, he claimed, expressed “the frantic rage and hypocritical canting of *Irish orange men*.”⁶¹ In addition, however, Driscoll, like many other immigrant radical newspaper editors, remained sceptical of Jefferson’s inauguration pledge to assist political reconciliation by not making a clean sweep of political offices. Such a policy gave the Federalists a platform from which to undermine Republican institutions. “Mr. Jefferson,” Driscoll wrote, “is a better

58 The latest estimates suggest that some 61,500 Irish emigrated to the United States between 1790 and 1799. Hans-Jurgen Grabbe, “European Immigration to the United States in the Early National Period, 1783–1820,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXXXIII (1989), 194.

59 *American Patriot*, 25 September 1802.

60 *Am. Pat.*, 25 September 1802, [Georgia] *Augusta Chronicle*, 21 April 1804, 18 May 1805.

61 *Am. Pat.*, 25 September 1802. For the Irish Presbyterians in Maryland Federalism, see William B. Wheeler, “Urban Politics in Nature’s Republic: The Development of Political Parties in the Seaport Cities in the Federalist Era,” Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 1967, chap. 4.

philosopher than he is a general, though all his philosophy has been abused and thrown away on American loyalists, aristocrats and tories." "The President will have to learn," he warned, "that we are not all federalists, nor all republicans." Republicanism will not be secure until all its opponents have been crushed.⁶²

Driscoll's battle with the Federalists was part of a larger war in which *The American Patriot* was supported by a number of other immigrant-edited newspapers. James Cheetham's New York *American Citizen*, the Irishman William Duane's Philadelphia *Aurora*, and, until his apostasy, James Thomson Callender's Richmond *Examiner*, all promoted the doctrines of democracy in the hope of pushing Jeffersonian Republicanism in a more radical and egalitarian direction.⁶³ In their respective cities, these editors sought to mobilize the political influence of recent immigrants from Britain and Ireland. In Baltimore, Driscoll lauded the republican sentiments of his fellow Irishmen. They are, he asserted,

The avowed enemies to tyranny in every part of the globe, . . . and have been among the foremost to defend the rights of man in America . . . if occasion should require it, they will be the first to shoulder the musket and march against the enemies of America.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, since the Alien Act of 1798 had increased residence requirements to fourteen years, the newly arrived Irish were unable to assert any influence on federal elections. In 1803, Driscoll strongly supported a memorial from the Republicans of Baltimore to Congress seeking a reduction of the period of residence to two years. He pointed out that many of the recent arrivals were respectable men of property anxious to demonstrate loyalty to their adopted country by taking out citizenship. He extolled the virtues of an open immigration policy, which would lead

62 *Am. Pat.*, 25 September, 13 November 1802; [Richmond] *Examiner*, 3 January, 23 September 1800; [New York] *American Citizen*, 5 June 1801. For Jefferson's removals policy, see Carl E. Prince, "The Passing of the Aristocracy: Jefferson's Removal of the Federalists, 1801-1805," *Journal of American History*, LVII (1970), 565; Noble E. Cunningham Jr., *The Process of Government Under Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 165-87; Robert M. Johnstone, Jr., *Jefferson and the Presidency: Leadership in the Young Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 102-13.

63 Michael Durey, "Thomas Paine's Apostles: Radical Emigres and the Triumph of Jeffersonian Republicanism," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XLIV (1987), 661-88; Michael Durey, *With the Hammer of Truth: James Thomson Callender and America's Early National Heroes* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

64 *Am. Pat.*, 16 October 1802.

to an influx of agricultural and manufacturing skills, and, eventually, to a white labor force large enough to permit the abolition of slavery. Driscoll was puzzled and disappointed when Congress rejected the memorial for its "indecorous language." It included a personal attack on former President John Adams and included none of the deferential periods still expected by the people's representatives. He concluded that America was not as yet "a land of freedom" for the Irish and suggested that they migrate to Louisiana — then still in French hands — "as a country fit for their genius and enterprise."⁶⁵

In April, 1803, Driscoll sold *The American Patriot* to his printers, Samuel McCrea and Samuel Kennedy.⁶⁶ Nine months later, he emerged in Georgia as the owner and editor of the well-established *Augusta Chronicle*, in which he promised to assert Republican principles, to defend the presidency against "anti-Republicans," and "to cherish Reason and Truth," the principles which first established republicanism in America.⁶⁷ In May, 1804, he opened a bookstore, in which he stocked a wide range of political and anti-Christian writings.⁶⁸ He engaged in sporadic partisan warfare with a rival newspaper editor, kept in contact with other Irish radical immigrants, and slowly withdrew from his excessive democratic inclinations into a moderate and comfortable Republicanism. In January, 1803, he had spoken favorably of direct democracy; by March, 1804, he was defending representative republicanism against the absurdities of immoral, majoritarian, "simple" democracy.⁶⁹ The beginnings of a fatal illness may have played a part in Driscoll's decline, perhaps brought on by the hardships of his life in Ireland. Certainly, other Irish political refugees took a long time to recover from their experiences.⁷⁰ While in Augusta, Driscoll toed the Republican party line with complete consistency, coming to life only when his acute Anglophobia coincided with Republican policy.

⁶⁵ *Am. Pat.*, 17, 26 February, 8 March 1803.

⁶⁶ *Am. Pat.*, 16 April 1803.

⁶⁷ *Aug. Chron.*, 28 January 1804.

⁶⁸ *Aug. Chron.*, 26 May 1804.

⁶⁹ *Am. Pat.*, 29 January 1803; *Aug. Chron.*, 24 March 1804, 18 May, 24 August 1805, 7 July, 5, 19 September 1807.

⁷⁰ See, for example, William Sampson to Grace Sampson, 17 August 1806, in Letters of William Sampson, Library of Congress; Will of Joseph Cormick, 3 November 1806, Wills Book A 1798-1839, Richmond County, Georgia, Department of Archives and History.

The very mild disapproval Driscoll showed for the institution of slavery while he was in Baltimore did not reappear after he had moved to the Deep South. In Maryland, he admittedly had done little more than mouth Jeffersonian platitudes, piously hoping that immigration would make slavery redundant, and rather hypocritically blaming Europeans rather than Americans for its perpetuation. In America, he claimed in 1802, "slavery is freedom, comparatively speaking." It is not known whether he owned slaves in Georgia, but if he did, it would not have been unusual. Virtually every radical immigrant who eventually settled in the South became a slaveholder in later life.⁷¹ Nothing perhaps more clearly shows Driscoll's decline, and the limits of Jacobinism, than his silence regarding slavery once he had settled in Georgia.

In July, 1810, Driscoll informed his readership that

having been these eighteen years past, both in the Old and New Country, fighting the battles of Republicanism, [he] perceives that his hairs have grown grey in the service, and his strength of body in decline, [although] the Mind is still the same. He therefore wishes to retire. . . .⁷²

His last editorial appeared on December 1, 1810. Three months later he died, after a long and painful illness. His obituary concluded that, during "his frequent vicissitudes," he had been "the uniform, steady and zealous friend of Liberty and mankind."⁷³

Denis Driscoll was in many ways an archetypal member of the Jacobin intelligentsia of the 1790s. His background reflected that mixture of strong educational attainments and social marginality which created amongst many young men an enthusiasm for political and social regeneration and impelled them into Painite radical movements in Britain and Ireland. Some became impetuous activists; others, like Driscoll, remained keener on speculative thought and the power of the pen. Extremely well read in

⁷¹ *Am. Pat.*, 2 October, 13 November 1802. Former radicals who owned slaves or condoned slavery included John Cormick, Thomas Cooper, Joseph Gales, John Binns, and James Thomson Callender. Cormick, a Dublin feather merchant, who had hidden Lord Edward Fitzgerald in 1798, escaped to Guernsey, but when captured had given up all his secrets, was with his brother Joseph friendly with Driscoll in Augusta. John Cormick owned a slave plantation. *Report from the Select Committee of the Irish House of Commons* (London, 1798), 16; Madden, *United Irishmen*, III 183-84.

⁷² *Aug. Chron.*, 21 July 1810.

⁷³ *Aug. Chron.*, 15 March 1811.

Enlightenment philosophy, Driscoll married continental thought with Painite radicalism to create a doctrine of Irish Jacobinism which, although not unique, was nevertheless unusual. His experiences, first in Ireland, and then in New York and Philadelphia, demonstrated that idealist speculations, based on the omnipotence of human reason, could not be imposed on society merely by spreading the word. The communitarian world of the artisans may have represented an ideal, but the mentality of the artisans themselves left much to be desired. Driscoll was not acting unusually when, at the turn of the century, he retreated from his extreme Jacobinism; others, more realistic than he came, in defeat, to regard contemporary society — especially Jeffersonian society — with more tolerance, settling for half a loaf rather than none.

It has been said of Driscoll that he was "one of the few Jacobins who remained revolutionary in America."⁷⁴ His final years in the Deep South do not support this judgement, although unlike some of his compatriots who promoted egalitarian doctrines and the rights of man in Europe, he never reneged on his essential Jacobinism when in America. Rather, Driscoll mellowed as he became convinced that the United States represented a society in which freedom of speech, of thought, and of belief were guaranteed by law. Success, and possibly marriage — he left "a disconsolate widow" — further encouraged a sense of complacency. He never retreated from his belief that Reason and rational religion would eventually regenerate society, but for the last eight years of his life he rejected the idea that he could be Reason's instrument.

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74 Twomey, "Jacobins and Jeffersonians," 98.